DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 028 159 TE 000 890

By-Manchel, Frank
Film Images of the Negro.
Pub Date Apr 67
Note-5p.
Journal Cit-The Teacher's Guide to Media & Methods; v3 n8 p18-20 22-3 48 Apr 1967
EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.35
Descriptors-Audiovisual Communication, Cultural Environment, *English Instruction, *Films, Mass Media, Minority Groups, Minority Role, Negro Culture, *Negroes, *Negro Stereotypes, Race, Racial Attitudes, Racial Differences, *Racial Discrimination, Social Discrimination

Educators can help students recognize the value of the motion picture as a social influence by exposing them to film stereotyping and the effect of this distortion on society. A historical study of the film image of the Negro will show him emerging from a humorous, fearful, "perverted" character in early films to "an unfortunate member of society" in post-World War II films to a "selfless and well-groomed- type of saint in present-day films. At least two obstacles may obstruct a study of Negro stereotypes--the difficulty of interpreting the Negro and the prejudices of the audience. Nevertheless, the students should be led to see that the responsibility for screen images, distorted or accurate, and thus the responsibility for the educating power of the motion picture lies as much with the audience as with the film producer. (SW)

ED 028159

THE TEACHERS GUIDE TO media & methods

An Expansion of SCHOOL PAPERBACK JOURNAL

April, 1967 Vol. 3, No. 8

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The Teachers Guide to MEDIA & METHODS (formerly SCHOOL PAPERBACK JOURNAL) is published nine times per year September through May by Media & Methods Institute, Inc., 124 East 40 Street, New York, N. Y. 10016. Phone: 212 MU 7-8458. Subscription: $3 per year, $4 in Canada. $2 each for 20 or more to one school address. Single copy 40¢. © Copyright, Media & Methods Institute, Inc., 1967. Printed in U.S.A. by World Color Press. Controlled circulation postage paid at Sparta, Illinois.

West Coast Advertising: J E Publishers' Representative Co. 8380 Melrose Ave., Los Angeles, California; 420 Market St., San Francisco, California.

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Film Images of the Negro

by Frank Manchel

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THE MOTION PICTURE, like the traditional arts, often uses mankind as its subject, and like the traditional arts again, serves as a social document. We find in motion pictures a reflection of an age. As a result, it is not surprising that in this generation there are many films which help us interpret the problems of prejudice, mental health, war and personal responsibility.

Recognizing that the movie industry is primarily a business, we understand that the factors that influence the form and technique of the film also influence the content of the motion picture. The desire for commercial success often results in stereotyping of themes, characters, plots and settings. Because film producers hope to appeal to the largest audience possible, the public is frequently presented with a distorted image of society.

A limited view of society may prove dangerous to the goals of a nation. While there are cultures which deliberately *use* motion pictures expressly for serving the interests of the state, ours does not. And since it is an acknowledged fact that many members of the cinematic audience assume what they see to be true, there is a need to look at the image of society presented by film as more than a form of entertainment.

Educators who have long since recognized the art of the film are agreed on the values of the motion picture for educating and elevating a society. Both the new teacher, the motion picture neophyte and older members of our profession should recognize that motion pictures can significantly affect the attitudes and behavior patterns of audiences. A way of mediating that influence is to have teachers develop studies of cinematic stereotypes. These studies will help students appreciate and understand motion pictures and will aid the mental growth of teenagers. There are at least two reasons for these assumptions.

First, we recognize that stereotypes are symbols of the world in which we live. Men have always found their environment complex and disturbing, and, as a result, have resorted to stereotypes to explain human existence. There is danger when the audience for these stereotypes does not distinguish between reality and illusion. The motion picture has helped to form what Robert Bone calls a "national iconography." Members of the audience, particularly adolescents who are uninformed and searching for knowledge, turn to screen images for information and inspiration. Paul Weitz has gone to the extent of calling the film a folk art. He believes that people find in movies a source of knowledge, education and myth which has helped to solidify our nation. By examining the stereotypes in film, we can help our students see some of the limitations of this type of "film education."

Second, stereotypes in any art form weaken the artistic value of the work. By exposing a class to film distortions, the instructor can discuss how (1) stereotypes prevent us from developing our imagination, and (2) how they distort our image of society.

FILM STEREOTYPES

Obviously, movie stereotyping is not alone to blame for a distorted image of the Negro. Such prejudice and bias that exists is the result of distortion within all communication media and forms of experience. It is also true that "Uncle Tom" characterizations and Stepin Fetchit images are reflections of a group of Negroes. This distortion in motion picture stereotyping lies in an emphasis on a negative image to the exclusion of the larger percent of the Negro population who have made many significant contributions to America's growth.

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Photo courtesy of The Memory Shop

Perhaps the most important question that concerns us as we study Negro stereotyping in films is: How are Negroes discriminated against? Most commentators who deal with the treatment of Negroes in movies discuss the presentation of colored people in real-life situations. Unfortunately, while there have been many such films, there have only been a handful of movies which have treated the image of the Negro with any degree of dignity. I am referring, for example, to *Nothing But a Man* (16mm: 1963, 92 mins., b/w, Brandon Films), which impressively treats a Negro worker and his wife.

Accurate images will expedite the process of learning. For example, what David Wark Griffith learned about the Negro by reading the writings of Woodrow Wilson and what the youngster can gain from the historical interpretations of Dwight L. Dumond, Kenneth M. Stampp, Benjamin Quarles, James M. McPherson, and C. Vann Woodward differ vastly. What our parents learned about Negroes from films like *Gone With the Wind* and *The Green Pastures* and what they can see in movies such as *Black Like Me, A Patch of Blue* and *The Cool World* are widely divergent. The former solidified the image of Negroes as evoking humor or fear. The latter are concerned more with emotional responses that empathize with the Negro problem. Realistically speaking, movie education, perhaps more than any other form of communication, can present us with a greater variety of images of Negroes than we are able to get by ourselves.

We need to recognize at least two obstacles to studying Negro stereotypes. One is the Negro himself. Like any member of a minority group, he is both similar to and different from other members of society. It is difficult to interpret not only him, but also his society. This difficulty exists for Negro artists themselves. Robert A. Bone in *The Negro Novel in America* has pointed this out:

> Like any other artist, the Negro novelist must achieve universality through a sensitive interpretation of his own culture. The American Negro, however, has not one but two cultures to interpret. He bears a double burden, corresponding to the double environment in which he lives. He must be conversant with Western culture as a whole, and especially with the tradition of English literature of which he is a part, and at the same time be prepared to affirm a Negro quality in his experience, exploiting his heritage as a legitimate contribution to the larger culture. (pp. 2-3)

Furthermore, since many Negroes have not been allowed to participate in motion pictures, the image of the Negro has been one created by white men. It is an image which, for the most part, has been sterile and static. The point is that the unreliable Negro stereotypes in film are the result of many factors.

The second difficulty in advancing the learning process resides within ourselves. Our environment has conditioned us to react first and think second. We have a tendency to select materials and information which we assume will be not only stimulating, but which will also reinforce our previous attitudes, suppositions, and experiences. Our prejudices greatly affect our willingness to be exposed to new ideas and to new points of view. And as we carefully select what we wish to expose ourselves to, we just as carefully avoid what we feel will be disturbing or contrary to our views. This selective exposure impedes our reasoning powers. The film industry is well aware of its audience's subjectivity and desperately tries to find what will appeal most to a mass audience. They also try to determine what the mass audience will actively avoid. As a result, producers many times manufacture films which reflect and reinforce existing points of view. The unfortunate part of this method of production is that many film-makers do not treat intelligently or artistically the controversial or difficult problems of the Negro's role in society.

Any understanding that the audience has of a particular subject seems to rest on the delicate balance between these elements of subjectivity and objectivity. As Siegfried Kracauer puts it:

> Any image we draw of an individual or a people is the resultant of an objective and a subjective factor. The former cannot grow indefinitely; nor can the latter be completely eliminated. What counts is the ratio between these two factors. Whether our image . . . comes close to the true likeness or merely serves as a vehicle of self-expression—that is, whether it is more of a portrait or more of a projection—depends upon the degree to which our urge for objectivity gets the better of naive subjectivity.[1]

The responsibility for screen images rests as much with the *audience* as with the film producers. If there are distorted screen images (as indeed there are), then it is due in part to the close relationship between the cinema and the social structure of the society. It is difficult, for example, to believe that an intelligent and in-

1. Siegfried Kracauer, "National Types as Hollywood Presents Them," *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, p. 258.

formed audience was unaware of perverted Negro screen images, particularly since it was that very public that subsidized those stereotypes for decades.

The stereotyping of Negroes in film history is, to say the least, disgraceful.[2] In the past, the audience has supported films which have depicted Negroes as fools, country bumpkins, freaks, servile individuals, and "Uncle Toms." Prior to 1918, these screen images, with few exceptions, were portrayed by white men wearing corked make-up. Following the end of World War I, Negroes were permitted to display themselves as stupid, frightened clods who panicked in the presence of ghosts, animals and shadows. When not otherwise occupied, the emancipated Negro actor could perform the role of a greedy and parasitic being. Although there were exceptions over the years—for example, *Arrowsmith* (1932) and *The Emperor Jones* (1935)—the image of the Negro up to the end of World War II was insulting and perverted.

These stereotypes reinforced the prejudice of a complacent society. They helped to create the impression that all Negroes were crude, violent, ignorant and unstable. The implication repeatedly found in these years was that the only good Negroes were those trained to know their places. Reasons for the plight and persecution of Ne-

HIP HIGH

Ampex Corporation is installing an unusual audio teaching system in the Oak Park and River Forest High School in Illinois. The dial access audio teaching system will enable 25 students in individual carrels to select any of 224 lessons contained in the memory banks. Lesson materials are available in all of the major subject areas, and students will be able to record their responses to materials and talk to an instructor by signaling the control center. In the same school, teacher Thomas Tegge tells us about an Independent Program in Asian Studies that he helped organize. Guest lecturers highlighted the program, and tapes were made of the lectures and other major materials.

2. For more complete information, the following sources are recommended: V. J. Jerome, *The Negro in Hollywood Films* (New York: Masses and Mainstream, 1950); John Howard Lawson, *Film in the Battle of Ideas* (New York: Masses and Mainstream, 1953); Peter Noble, *The Negro in Films* (London: Skelton Robinson, 1950); and Arun Kumar Chaudhuri, "A Study of the Negro Problem in Motion Pictures," (unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Southern California, 1961).
3. See Charles L. Hutchins, "A Critical Evaluation of the Controversies Engendered by D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*," (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Iowa, 1961).

groes were carefully avoided. Everything seemed to exist in a vacuum. One has only to return to one of the first major treatments of these stereotypes in *The Birth of A Nation* (16mm: 1915, 100 mins., b/w, Audio Film Center, Museum of Modern Art). Here is one Southerner's view of the American Civil War and the Reconstruction Period that followed. Teachers should be aware that the film is known to have a negative effect upon an unsophisticated audience.[3]

Stereotyping has resulted in another major image: the Negro who loves to sing, dance and laugh. Stepin Fetchit created the role of the black man who feigned stupidity, while singing and dancing his way through life. Peter Noble in *The Negro in Films* aptly describes this uncomplimentary image when he discusses the typical Fetchit characterization. In *Hearts of Dixie*, the screen is filled with happy slaves in the cotton fields. Enter Stepin Fetchit typifying

> . . . the lazy, good-for-nothing but good natured slave, unwilling to work yet forgiven for his backslidings and errant ways. The boss 'playfully' kicks him in the rear, and Fetchit responds with a broad grin and a sly wink to the audience. Here is the typical screen 'darkie,' a picture distorted out of all serious reality. Black clown Fetchit follows in the Uncle Tom tradition: he is a 'good nigger,' he is lazy and shiftless, yet 'all right at heart,' and—most important of all—*he knows his place.* (p. 50)

As the world emerged from the Second World War, the public seemed willing to support motion pictures in which Negroes were given more significant roles. These films, sometimes called "the Negro interest films," attempted to present, so the public appeared willing to believe, the Negro as an equal member of society. Such films as—*Home of the Brave* (16mm: 1949, 88 mins., b/w, Brandon Films, Cinema Guild, Twyman, Audio Film Center), a war story in the Pacific that turns on a soldier's feelings about a Negro buddy; *Lost Boundaries* (16mm: 1949, 97 mins., b/w, Contemporary Films), the story of a light-skinned Negro doctor who passes for white; *Pinky* (16mm: 1949, 87 mins., b/w, Films Incorporated), the story of a Negro girl who passes for white; and *Intruder in the Dust* (16mm: 1949, 87 mins., Films Incorporated), the story of a Southern Negro accused of murdering a white man—suggested, in point of fact, that the Negro was tolerated by the white man. The stereotype implied that the present day Negro was

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FILM IMAGES

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an unfortunate member of society who had to rely on influential or strong-willed white men for his salvation. Another interpretation is given by Ralph Ellison, who sees these films as representations of the white man's basic and uncomfortable attitudes toward Negroes.

> Are Negroes cowardly soldiers? *(Home of the Brave);* are Negroes the real polluters of the South? *(Intruder in the Dust);* have mulatto Negroes the right to pass as white, at the risk of having black babies, or if they have white-skinned children, of revealing to them that they are, alas, Negroes? *(Lost Boundaries);* and finally, should Negro girls marry white men or—wonderful *non sequitur*—should they help their race? (*Pinky*).[4]

And what of the present series of films on interracialism and the Negro in urban society? True, there is a new stereotype, just as unreliable as previous ones, although not quite as insulting to our intelligence. Take for example the recent film so lauded by the public, *Patch of Blue*. Here we have the image of the educated Negro man who assumes the colored man's burden for educating the illiterate and backward whites. As Brendon Gill describes it:

> This caricature of the Negro as a Madison Avenue sort of Christian saint, selfless and well-groomed, is becoming a movie cliche nearly as tiresome and, at bottom, nearly as patronizing as the cretinous figure that Stepin Fetchit used to play. . . .[5]

The point being made again and again is that no extremes help an art form or accurately educate the public. Art and education need to rely on depth, sincerity and integrity.

The final question of what can be done is answered throughout this essay. We must recognize the value and influence of the motion picture both for entertainment and for education. Then we must create an atmosphere in which students can learn to understand and to appreciate the motion picture as an art form and as a social influence. Furthermore, it seems to me that the film industry also has a responsibility for providing an atmosphere in which writers, directors and actors—Negroes and whites—can find freedom of expression. Then, perhaps we will see film take its place both in the schools and in our society as one of the great art forms.

4. Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, p. 277.
5. Brendan Gill, "Current Cinema," *New Yorker* (Dec. 25, 1965), 58, 61.